

Political consciousness

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Antipode: *Keywords in Radical Geographical Thought*

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Keyword: Political Consciousness

My key phrase was inspired by the Gramscian formulation of 'hegemony' and the problematics of *political consciousness* for 'radical' and 'critical' intellectuals in society. We often find ourselves claiming radical or indeed cutting *critical* ground in the challenge of inequalities including: poverty (Martin and Philo, 1995), social exclusion (Sibley, 1998), patriarchy (McDowell, 1986) neoliberalism (Amin and Thrift 2005; Tickell, 1995) colonialism (Raghuram *et. al* 2014; Blunt and McEwan 2003; Driver, 2001; Livingstone and Withers, 1999) and imperialism (Gregory, 2004) or indeed spearheading movements for decolonising the academy (Radcliffe, 2017) or accounting for power in networks of racism (Woods, 2002; McKittrick and Woods, 2007) and cultural prejudice (Kobayashi and Peake, 1994). However as Gramsci's work shows, there is a long history of intellectuals operating in duplicity as 'arms' of the state in supporting, promulgating and indeed defending ideas that support the formation and powerful work of cultural hegemony. In celebrating *Antipode's* 50th anniversary of publication, and a site of radical geographical thought, it is important to examine the ways in which 'radical' and 'critical' are claimed without necessarily challenging the work of cultural hegemony that academia is also inculcated into (Waterstone, 2002). The critical radical edge of geography celebrates, promotes and indeed promises *praxis*, however (despite the introduction of market forces in the form of fees) the cultural economies of Higher Education are increasingly wedded to delivering the reproduction of society with 'civic' values and hierarchies that are untouched (Bates, 1975). There is a symptomatic double-facedness that requires us to both inhabit civic structures of producing 'good citizens' whilst critiquing state governance as it reproduces spheres of domination, through economic policy, the militarisation of borders, the structures of law, judiciary and policing, injustice, inequality and oppression. *Praxis* ultimately is antithetical to being edified in the economies and cultural communities of academia. To be radical, critical and usurping of the status quo, for many academics is to be situated *outside* the gates and towers of rightful belonging; this is despite being supported by intellectual theory produced from the radical traditions and ethos.

What Gramsci argues is that any intellectual class of a society effectively promulgates and reproduces the values of the elite and as such creates a sense of community solidarity which itself subordinates others. Thus, there is a false promise in that the intellectual class can empower, revolutionise or indeed assist in dismantling regimes of truth, and structures of dominion over others.

"an independent class of intellectuals does not exist, but rather every social group has its own intellectuals. However the intellectuals of the historically progressive class...exercise such a power of attraction that they end...by subordinating intellectuals of other social groups and thus create a system of solidarity among all intellectuals."(Bates, 1975: 353)

In this vein then, the European intellectuals' commitment to racial science and to cultural hierarchies in the 19th century can be seen as examples of western intellectuals subordinating 'others'. By

utilising the power of European intellectual realms and accoutrements of academia, dominion over the very value of other bodies and minds as well as delimiting the boundaries of thought and acceptable ideas to within its own intellectual community. This leads us to reflect then on how exactly is the academic community and the discipline of geography *radical* and *critical* in light of its positioning in relation to dependency on the state, and indeed increased dependence given the 'impact' and 'prevent'ⁱⁱ agendas that colour higher education's independence and autonomy in thought and praxis (see Holmwood 2011; and Martin, 2011). There is also an embedded contradiction in Gramsci's account of left-wing intellectuals and their potential for creating a new world order. There is a rejection of the state as non-representative of majority world rights and values, yet the very sustenance of academia is dependent on the state having use for its role in producing citizens and assisting with its work of compliance and policing challenges to its very function.

What to Do?

Praxis is the element that I wish to focus on in this section. The process of praxis commences with a sense of political awareness beyond an understanding of individual needs and struggles, in the workplace the distinction can be made between individual awareness of others' rights and an understanding of collective positioning and solidarity; praxis is the actions undertaken towards attaining better conditions for all. Thus in the mode of praxis, consciousness evolves to then to demands for emancipation and freedoms for all. Praxis is about action that seeks to shift the conditions under which oppression and limitations are defined, met and secured. Praxis has been discussed as the pragmatic actions that create the circumstances from which we can challenge hegemonic ideas and also recognise them as not being in collective interests. Critical thought without practice is simply armchair theory; and as such, working in the realms of theory does not, and cannot create conditions for counter-hegemony or indeed new infrastructures of freedom. As Woods (2005) has so elegantly shown in the US, in 1967/8 there is a recognition amongst black African-Americans of their shared oppression, poverty and a society that does not serve them equally. What emerges from the recognition of collective oppression, is a black political consciousness that seeks to imagine a society free of the constraints of hegemony which serves to reproduce US apartheid; "(T)he conditions and consciousness of the rural African American working class shocked and radicalised both King and Malcom X in the last years of their lives (Woods, 2005; p187). It is in these conditions that the *Poor Peoples March* of 1968 garnered collective political praxis to include "Native americans, Chicanos, Puerta Ricans and Whites (p187)".

It is clear that *praxis* stems from a desire to win *collective* freedoms. Rather than focus on the success of a vanguard of critical thinkers, the *edges* of the limits to academic praxis can be exposed by looking at inequalities that have survived in perpetuity (see Pilkington, 2011). Within academia there are 'others' that are subordinated and reduced to lesser, and as such bear costs of exclusion, discrimination and prejudice. Within the very realms of theoretical radicalism and critical geographical challenge, there are negations of the rights of individuals and groups; these are breaches of laws and of principles of equality in the realms of race, gender, disability, sexual orientation and class. The lack of focus on praxis can be measured in the uneven landscape of academia as a site of work, itself, in the inequalities borne through representation, non-employment, teaching only contracts and figures for pay, promotion and retention of those discriminated against colleagues and students (see

Brooke and Nicholls, 2006; HEA/ECU, 2011; Shen, 2013; Blackaby *et al*, 2005). In this century, the campaigns for 'Why isn't my professor black?'ⁱⁱⁱ chime with reports on BAME student attainment gaps as well as BAME staff appointments, promotion and retention (Runnymede, 2015). Overall there is evidence for bias in appointment, recruitment, promotion and inclusion within universities of BAME staff and women. As a result of unconscious or implicit bias, monocultures are created when people recruit in their own image. This is particularly true in senior positions. A number of institutions are introducing training which looks at unconscious bias. Despite the training, the cultures of academia are as much about being seen to be doing something as actually effecting change. As Ahmed (2006) has stated there is a dance that occurs where the most passionate of anti-racists get co-opted into committees and groups that are responsible for writing policy, and developing Athena Swan Charter Mark applications. As such there is containment of momentum, political will and moral imperatives which edify certain individuals, managers or departments, but which fail to create an environment of inclusion, respect and valuing of 'other' staff.

"A document that documented the racism of the university became usable as a measure of good performance. Here, having a good race-equality policy quickly got translated into being good at race equality. Such a translation works to conceal the very inequalities that the documents were written to reveal. In other words, its very existence is taken as evidence that the institutional environment documented by the document (racism, inequality, injustice) has been overcome; as if by saying that we "do it" means that's no longer what we do."(Ahmed, 2006: 108)

This negation of action towards righting inequalities is the responsibility of all of us. Praxis is very much about recognising and then doing political work to address the structural inequalities that we are complacent about in our everyday life (see Tolia-Kelly, 2017). These exclusions are not accidental, benign omissions but point to the very gaps in political consciousness that is embodied in everyday university work. These active omissions of praxis reduce the potential of lived lives of academic colleagues and students within our presumed *meritocracy* that remains unchallenged in the realms where it matters; in recruitment, promotion, retention and our duty of care towards well-being of marginalised colleagues and students. This includes incorporating consciousness beyond our usual grammars, vocabularies and fields of vision to incorporate *other* embodied ontologies that may shake the foundations of our sometimes parochial habitus (e.g. Woods, 2005). In praxis radical and critical research has often created a valuable cultural currency amongst us, which is rewarded by promotion and recognition. What is clear on reviewing the list of geographical, radicals listed at the start of this piece is that the institutions reflected by geography's *radical* geographers remain unreconstructed; 'meritocracy' remains unchallenged, despite the statistical evidence against this belief system. The very politics of the work of challenging institutional racism, misogyny, violence and exclusion is not necessarily addressed by those who are the most radical in publications and rhetoric. There are a handful of activist-practitioners that are part of the struggle to reshape the political palette of the university as a workplace, at severe personal cost (Routledge, 2012). What is missing is the orientation towards collective praxis, to challenge the dimensions of

individual rewards for individual impact (see Fuller and Kitchin, 2004). What is needed is a raising of our game. Of conscious political action beyond the page. By paying appropriate attention to our own *positioning* as teachers, researchers, employers, colleagues and activists (Wakefield, 2007), the very realms within our collective power should become sites of political praxis, and not only things which can promote our careers and radical brandings in our neoliberal institutional life.

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ⁱ <https://www.ukri.org/innovation/excellence-with-impact/> (accessed July 27th 2018)

ⁱⁱ <http://www.safecampuscommunities.ac.uk/the-prevent-agenda> (accessed July 27th 2018)

ⁱⁱⁱ <https://www.timeshighereducation.com/blog/why-my-professor-still-not-black> (accessed July 27th 2018)